

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001278

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV; HQ USPACOM FOR FPA HUSO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAKSIN'S VICTORY -- CREDIT THE MAN, INNOVATIVE POLICIES, AND THE THAI RAK THAI POLITICAL MACHINE

REF: BANGKOK 1039 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The landslide victory of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in the February 6 parliamentary election victory reconfirmed the Prime Minister's domination of the Thai political landscape. Thaksin's personality, sophisticated media presentation, focused populist message, and traditional get-out-the-vote organizing combined to allow TRT to leave the Democratic Party, its closest rival, in the political dust. The February 6 election is regarded as generally free and fair. END SUMMARY.

THAILAND'S GREAT COMMUNICATOR

2. (SBU) As the February 25 date for announcement of the official election results approaches, it is clear that Thai Rak Thai (TRT) candidates won over 375 (of 500 seats) in the Lower House of Parliament. This huge majority will allow PM Thaksin to form an unprecedented single-party Thai government. The key to TRT's overwhelming win was the enormous personal prestige of PM Thaksin with the Thai electorate, an appeal he bolstered by delivering on promised populist programs and slick political marketing tactics throughout his first term. While the Thaksin image is underpinned by Thailand's spurt in economic growth and full recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis, it has also been skillfully built up.

3. (SBU) In the Thai context, Thaksin's confident personality lent itself to image magnification. As a largely self-made billionaire, he has benefited from Buddhist beliefs, still strong in the rural electorate, that success in this life reflects having lived a good life in the previous incarnation. The decisive "CEO" image that he cultivated may annoy members of the Thai elite and sophisticated urbanites, but it appeals to other voters who believe Thailand needs a tough leader to address social problems and walk proudly on the international stage. His combative statements, harsh strategies of wars on drugs, corruption and, over the last year, on Muslim separatists in the South attracted many Thais even as they appalled international observers.

POPULIST IMAGES AND POLICIES, AND STAYING ON MESSAGE

4. (SBU) Examples abound too of how PM Thaksin, working closely with media savvy TRT aides, transformed many of his day-to-day duties of his office into opportunities to highlight his decisive leadership and populist policies. PM Thaksin regularly holds "mobile" cabinet meetings -- at least one a month -- in different provinces outside of Bangkok. These traveling roadshows always projected the Prime Minister sleeping on a mat at a local Buddhist temple, or walking with farmers in the fields promising them debt relief, or fixing some thorny local dispute with the Governor or local officials. These populist images helped keep Thaksin's personal approval rates consistently above 60 percent. They are reinforced by Thaksin's use of weekly radio talks (suspended during the official election campaign) to explain his actions to "the people."

5. (SBU) In November 2004, a few months before the elections, Thaksin and TRT -- mobilizing every Royal Thai Government (RTG) agency to sponsor a booth -- staged a week-long government fair at an exhibition mall in Bangkok. This fair highlighted Thaksin's policies: the popular 30-baht health scheme, the revolving village fund, low income housing, educational scholarships abroad, the One-Tambon-One-Product (OTOP) program, and others. It was a reminder that he has continued to implement the populist programs he promised before the 2001 election, which critics had predicted would be impossible to sustain. The central theme of this fair was an ingenious portrayal of the PM as the CEO of Thailand, a leader doing all he could to help the nation through "grassroots" efforts to become prosperous and more developed.

6. (SBU) Thaksin, who has no equal in Thailand on how to attract political attention, even used the media to great effect when, just before the election, an accident in

Bangkok's newly opened subway system forced a two-week closure. At the grand re-opening designed to restore confidence in riders, the PM showed up with young TRT candidates and several well-dressed TV personalities in tow. In contrast, Apirak Kosayodhin, the Democrat Party (DP) Governor of Bangkok, just elected in August of last year, failed to make an appearance. Thaksin also dominated media coverage after the December 26 tsunami, immediately visiting the devastated provinces, mixing in with the survivors, and promising that the RTG would tide over victims with immediate relief and foot all the big infrastructure repair costs. After the election, Bangkok Governor Apirak commented to the Ambassador on the PM's ability to "turn crisis into opportunity" as one major factor in TRT's strong showing.

TRT STRENGTHS: DISCIPLINE, COMBINING "MODERN" AND TRADITIONAL POLITICS

17. (SBU) Aside from the personal draw of Thaksin and the popularity of his populist policies with poor urban and rural voters, the TRT party showed itself to be better organized and innovative than the opposition parties. As illustrated, TRT insiders proved throughout Thaksin's first term their mastery of modern marketing techniques to boost the Prime Minister's image and sell his programs. TRT demonstrated it could appeal over the heads of local power brokers directly to voters, but at its core it remains a party combining factions of tough "traditional" politicians, whose political styles remain common. In January, Deputy Agriculture Minister Newin Chidchob, a key and controversial veteran TRT party operative, was reportedly caught red-handed offering to buy votes at a vote canvassers' meeting in southern Thailand. The scandal began to grow but, in a matter of days, Newin was relocated from his assignment to &reign in the South from DP control to his Northeast stronghold. The controversy over Newin's actions raged in the media for a few days, but he was unavailable for the opposition to exploit it politically. While Newin's problems may have influenced the outcome that the TRT lost across the South (and even the MP constituency seats it had held in the far southern provinces), the party was able to deflect a nasty campaign image that might have tarred candidates in other regions. Accusations against Newin are pending in the EC.

WAS THE ELECTION FREE AND FAIR?

18. (U) The Election Commission (EC) has estimated nationwide voter turnout on February 6, 2005 at just under 73 percent, or nearly 3 percent more than the last general election in 2001. While the independent EC ran the nuts and bolts of the polling process, the sitting RTG had the budget and control of state agencies to give itself advantages. Many complaints about individual races have been lodged. However, by most accounts, the RTG did not unduly press its "state influence" advantages, and the running of this election was remarkably smooth and fair, even though all parties engaged in vote buying and other traditional political tactics to some degree. Even in tsunami-affected areas, the vote went on with few problems. Most importantly, security officials were able to maintain a nearly incident-free election day in the nation's troubled far southern region.

19. (U) The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), a Bangkok-based network of Asian election observation and human rights organizations, described the election in these terms: "The process was generally free and fair, and the results, by and large, represented the will of the people." ANFREL, which dispatched over 40 international election observers nationwide, took note of the prevalence of vote buying and claim of misuse of RTG funds to sway voters, such as use of tsunami relief efforts in Phangnga province. However, ANFREL

SIPDIS

was also impressed that by the 3 pm polls closing on election day, an organized, carefully watched vote count had been conducted, and some 34 million Thais had voted. ANFREL did not fundamentally dispute the process that allowed TRT and Thaksin to roll up an unprecedented landslide victory.

THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY: CAPABLE OF RENEWAL?

110. (SBU) Comment: Thaksin demonstrated his strong personal appeal, and he and TRT received credit from most voters for Thailand's vigorous economic growth and increased regional stature. Even in the fourteen provinces of the South, where TRT lost all individual constituency contests, it received more than three times the number of "party list" votes than in 2001. Nothing in the Thai Constitution prevents Thaksin from running for a third (or more) four-year term and the future looks bleak to the opposition. Thaksin critics are grumbling fiercely and many make dire predictions about the dangers of weakened checks and balances. Uniformly, however, they agree that the overall election results reflected the electorate's choice.

111. (SBU) The DP and other opposition parties were soundly

beaten in this election. On the national level, the DP was unable to pose a strong alternative to Thaksin, could only offer promises that mimicked his popular policies in health and education reform, and virtually conceded defeat more than a year before the election. Some newspapers have claimed that the DP party symbol, a statue of the Goddess of the Earth, cried tears of sorrow on the night of February 6, and some superstitious Thais interpret this as a permanent inability of the DP to compete with TRT. However, in the aftermath, the fact that the DP won decisively in the South and will lead the opposition with (probably) 96 MPs is beginning to sink in. Abhisit Vejjajiva is likely to replace the stolid Banyat Bantadhan as DP leader, and he has already tried to publicly discuss alternatives to Thaksin's provocative security approach to the South, where increasing separatist violence may prove to be the Administration's Achilles Heel. There are signs that other DP leaders are serious about restructuring the DP to be more pro-active in criticizing the incoming TRT administration, and to better adjust to the new style of politics that Thaksin has introduced. They talk openly of the need to steal some pages from the TRT electioneering playbook to ensure that the party regains a truly national constituency. End Comment.

BOYCE